# CARS, CONDOS AND CAI PNG*:

Singaporeans' Perceptions of Class, Wealth and Status

* Cai Png is economical rice that is commonly found in Singapore eateries
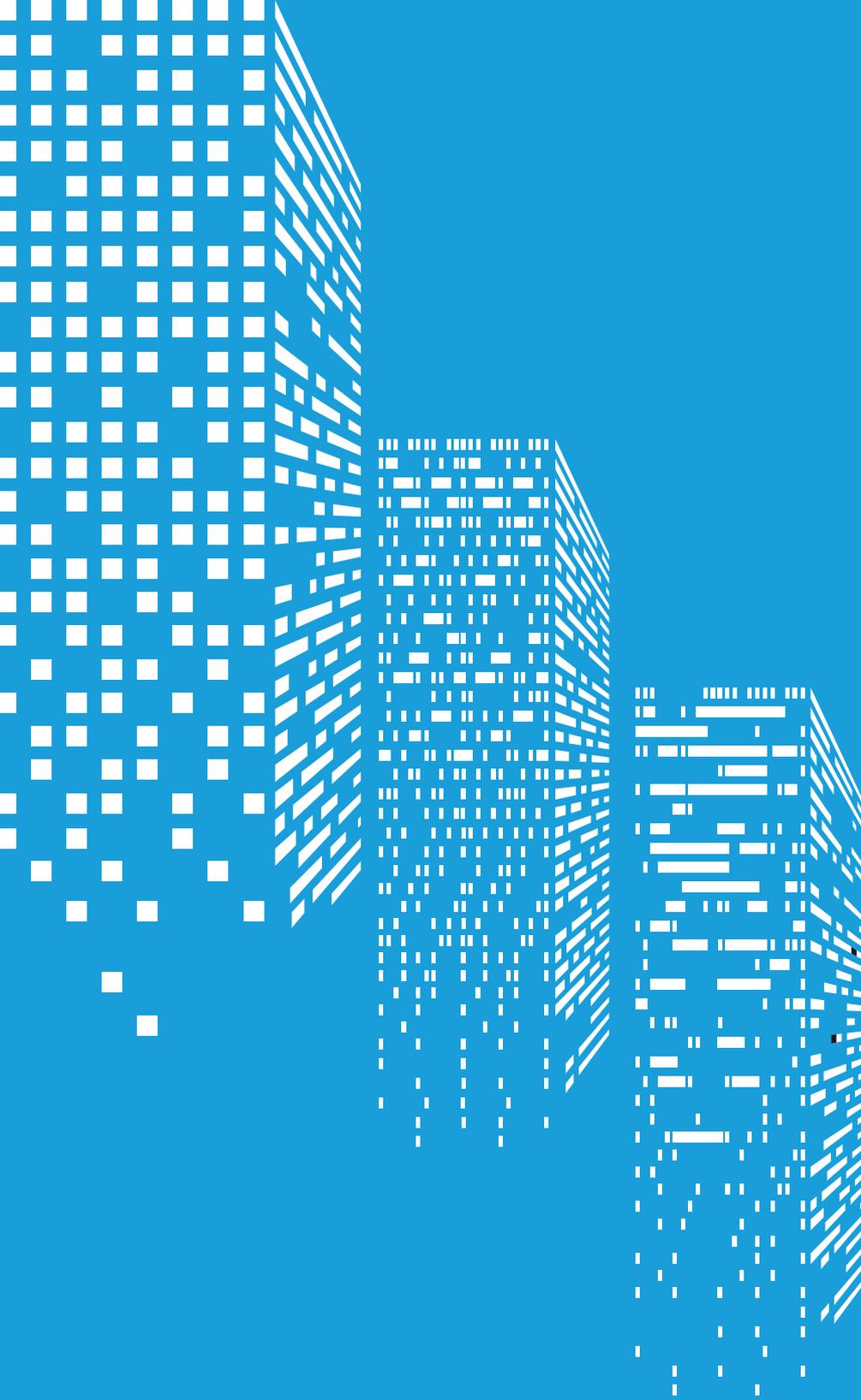
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: What is class?

> " I know it when I see it."
>
> - Potter Stewart

Humans make dozens or even hundreds of snap judgements about the social status of our fellows every day. No matter how egalitarian society aspires to be, the impulse to place others either above or below ourselves on the social scale is instinctive and irrepressible. Whether we admire or resent those above us, pity or condescend to those below us, the instantaneous instinctive assessment is beyond our conscious control. Even more intriguingly, every individual has their own unique standards for evaluating the social status of their peers. Nevertheless, when we say "high class", others still immediately and instinctively understand what the term means.

The simplest interpretation of class is undoubtedly the Marxian one: class consists of the visible manifestations of economic relations.[1] Under this framework, more money equals higher class. If a particular form of behaviour or pattern of consumption is perceived as being high class, it is merely because it happens to be favoured by those who have the most money. In other words, classical music is high class because it is preferred by those with money, while hardbass is low class because it is enjoyed by those who do not. Over time, as manifestations of wealth become assimilated in the popular imagination with the personal qualities of those who display them, they become barriers to entry to the upper strata of society: studying classical music is expensive and time-consuming, which restricts the ability of aspirational members of the lower classes to use it as a stepping stone to a higher status.[2]

At the opposite end of the scale, one can find what could be called the Confucian concept of class. According to this vision of the world, class is defined entirely be behaviour. An impoverished gentleman of impeccable manners and morals is high class, while a poorly behaved individual remains low class, however wealthy he may be.[3] Indeed, dignified poverty may actually be a better indicator of class than dishonestly-acquired wealth. Such a perception of class can frequently find itself in direct contradiction with the Marxian vision described above. When Charles de Gaulle commented that John F. Kennedy's widow would doubtless "end up on an arms dealer's yacht", it was intended an expression of waspish aristocratic disdain, not of admiration for the lifestyles of the rich and famous.[4]

In practice, however, it is a rare individual whose mind jumps straight to either Marx or Confucius when making judgements about class and status. Instead, we rely on more concrete heuristics, however culpable we may feel for doing so. Whether it is a Birkin bag, a bowl of shark's fin soup, a knowledge of how to address a retired Ambassador in correspondence, or a self-deprecating sense of humour, we all carry with us a grab-bag of "tells" that we use to rank our fellows. Nevertheless, most of us would be profoundly uncomfortable displaying such heuristics (or prejudices) in public.

[1] Karl Marx. *A contribution to the critique of political economy.* No. 1. International Library Publishing Company; London, Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner, Limited, 1904.
[2] Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Nice (trans.). *Outline of a Theory of Practice.* Cambridge University Press, 1977.
[3] Burton Watson. *The analects of Confucius.* Columbia University Press, 2007.
[4] Caroline Kennedy. *Jacqueline Kennedy: Historic Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy.* Hachette UK, 2011.

Thus, when British politician Michael Jopling was quoted as disparaging a colleague for having "had to buy all his own furniture", the sentiment was universally deplored for its obnoxiously snobbish character, but was nevertheless so instantly recognisable to all who heard it that it passed immediately into the dictionaries of great political quotations.[5]

Singapore experienced this phenomenon first-hand in 2018, when Ahmad Matin, a former teacher posted a picture to Facebook of a page from a social studies textbook published for use in schools. The page dealt with the topic of socioeconomic status (SES), explaining that SES is often a product of a person's education, income, job and wealth. The book went on to state that "in Singapore income is usually used to measure a person's SES" and that "SES can determine a person's choice of language, housing, food, entertainment and activities" and can "also influence friends he interacts with". The book also published a table of "high SES" and "low SES" habits and activities:

HIGHER SES :::::::::::::::::::::::::

- **Use of formal English in daily conversation or at home**
- **Sports like golf or tennis at an exclusive country club**
- **Regular fine dining at expensive restaurants**
- **Youths travelling overseas during school holidays every year for leisure**

LOW SES :::::::::::::::::::::::::

- **Use of Singlish or different dialects in daily conversation or at home**
- **Sports like soccer or basketball at the local HDB estate**
- **Eating at hawker centres or at home**
- **Youths taking on part-time jobs during vacation time to meet basic family needs**

Source: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/social-studies-guidebook-causes-controversy-online-moe-says-book-not-on-approved

The public reaction was immediate and lively. While some agreed with the textbook's definitions, the vast majority – most of whom saw themselves in the "low SES" category – were outraged by the book's perceptions of class. The Ministry of Education was quick to deny responsibility for the volume, pointing out that it did not carry the Ministry's official stamp and was thus not required lesson content in any public schools.

Opinions spanned the spectrum from "the truth is hard to take" to "Omg... What kind of mentality is this?"[6] While many respondents disagreed with the placement of the items in the table, an equal or greater proportion appeared to object less to the content than to the fact that it had been published at all. In much the same manner as the "had to buy his own furniture" remark cited above, the implication seemed to be that while one may think such things in private, they should not be expressed publicly, whether for reasons of politeness or of social harmony.[7]

---

[5] Alan Clark. *Diaries: In Power 1983-1992*. 1993, Weidenfield & Nicholson.
[6] Comments taken from the original Facebook post, retrieved 30 March 2019: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10160289549510790&set=pcb.10160289549575790&type=3&theater
[7] Andrew Sayer. "What are you worth?: Why class is an embarrassing subject." *Sociological research online 7*, no. 3 (2002): 1-17.

Perversely, the sheer amount of online and printed comment on the issue made it difficult to draw any generalisable conclusions about ordinary Singaporeans' perceptions and feelings on the topic. While the data was abundant, its dispersal across multiple channels, the anonymous quality of the vast majority of comments, and the noise-to-signal ratio made evaluating it in a scientific manner close to impossible.

However, the difficulties inherent in studying a particular topic, however great, should not deter researchers from tackling it at all, and the question of class and inequality in Singapore is an interesting one. Where older nations and societies have built up centuries' accumulated prejudices regarding class, Singapore is something of a social petri-dish: a society created relatively recently from disparate parts. While the nations of Europe and Northeast Asia have had time to build up and tear down aristocratic political systems, Singapore's history as a distinct polity spans just a few generations – scarcely enough time to build up a nobility of its own, whether formal or informal. Is Singapore, then, a relatively classless society? Or does it exemplify the Marxian view of class as a pure product of wealth? Or are Singaporean attitudes towards class the product of the cultural traditions – Chinese, Malay, Indian, British and others – that have influenced the island's heritage in other domains?[8]

To resolve this question, a wide-scale, open-ended questionnaire was created. This survey was designed to capture the rich diversity of opinion as expressed online following the textbook controversy, while filtering out the noise and other confounding factors. This data was then analysed using topic-modelling algorithms developed within NUS to identify and break down the most important trends.

The result is a crowdsourced definition of socioeconomic status: often debatable, frequently self-contradictory, but never short of intriguing. As Adrian Kuah, Senior Research Fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy put it, this report aims to interrogate "the concepts and categories that we use far too loosely in everyday conversations and, worse, in the policymaking process. I think the report will be useful in unpacking the hidden assumptions that underpin the familiar and taken-for-granted terms such

as 'class'. By using local examples from the lived everyday experiences of Singaporeans, the survey makes real and relatable to the Singaporean readership issues that are typically discussed in abstract terms."

Our definitions are, however, evolving creatures. The current snapshot dates to February 2019, but is intended to develop over time.

If you would like more information about the survey, the methods or the technology involved, please contact nigel.lian@nus.edu.sg or jen@voxdei.io.

Singapore, March 2019

---
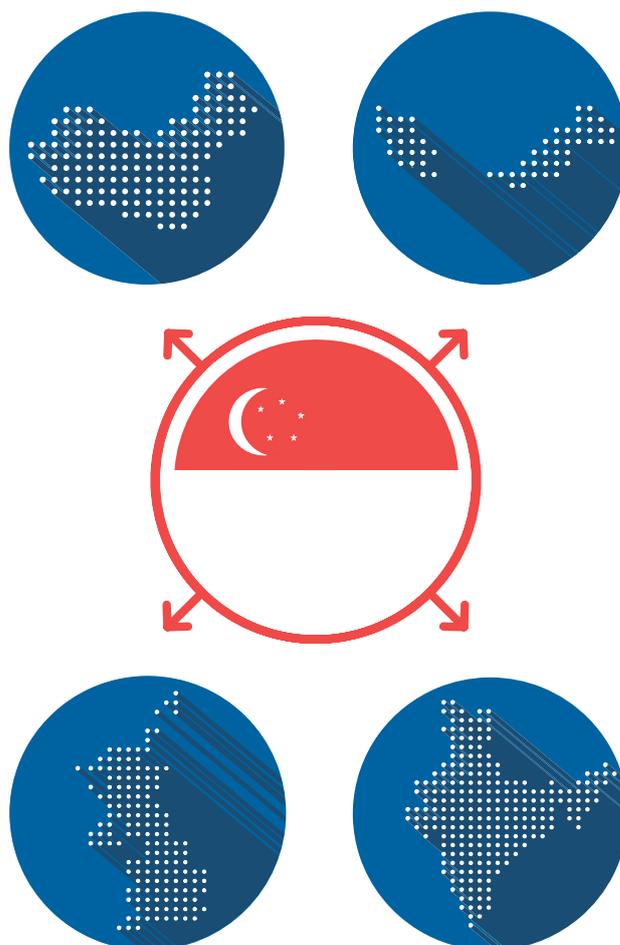
[8] For a review of the various metrics that have previously been used to analyse class in Singapore, see Tan Ern Ser. *Does class matter: Social stratification and orientations in Singapore.* World Scientific, 2004.

1. METHODOLOGY

While the original Singapore SES textbook controversy (see introduction) produced an enormous amount of data concerning Singaporeans' opinions on class, wealth and inequality, the format of the information made it exceptionally difficult to process in a scientific manner.[9] The comments were spread across multiple websites, frequently anonymous, and suffered from a high noise-to-signal ratio. Moreover, no social media post is context-free. Every remark on a given topic on Reddit, Twitter or Facebook is influenced not merely by the topic itself, but also by the comments that preceded it. A social media thread is an emergent creature, producing an opinion or collection of opinions that can be entirely at odds with the opinions of each participant as expressed in a vacuum.

Nevertheless, social media data has one key advantage over conventional multiple choice survey data, in that it provides long-format answers. A market researcher asking whether respondents eat more salads or fried chicken will get an answer, but will have little or no information about the factors that influenced or could potentially nuance that answer. Respondent A may tick "salads", but it is possible that he just started a crash diet and would otherwise eat fried chicken several times a week. Respondent B may eat one or two pieces of fried chicken when her colleagues order take-away, but never buy it for herself. Respondent C may buy a salad wrap every day, but be unsure whether this should be considered salad for the purposes of the survey. Even worse, multiple choice questionnaires tend, inevitably, to push respondents towards a set of answers that are based upon the personal assumptions of the question-setter. A polling company may ask citizens whether they are more liberal or conservative in an attempt to predict election outcomes, but the data is meaningless if most voters make their decision based not upon ideology but upon their assessment of the things that their representative has done for the local area.[10]

To retain the free and unbiased quality of social media data while incorporating the statistical generalisability of multiple choice polling, we designed a wide-scale, open-ended survey, giving respondents the chance to express themselves as freely as possible, while eliminating the confounding factors present on social media.[11]

While qualitative data has traditionally been seen as the poor relation of the statistics world, the development of improved text analytics software has made the processing of large quantities of text data both feasible and economical.[12] It is now possible to ask a statistically representative sample of any given population an open-ended question and use topic modelling to translate the qualitative responses into generalisable statistics. Thus, instead of asking 1000 people whether they buy salad or fried chicken for lunch, it is possible to simply ask them what their lunch preferences are, collect the responses, and use topic-modelling software to conclude that, for example, 15% of the respondents mentioned salad or salad-adjacent options (vegetable smoothies, protein bowls, salad wraps...), a figure which can then reasonably be generalised to the population at large.

In this case, respondents were asked a series of demographic questions, followed by three substantive opinion-focused questions:[13]

---

[9] Axel Bruns. "Faster than the speed of print: Reconciling 'big data' social media analysis and academic scholarship." *First Monday 18,* no. 10 (2013).
[10] David De Vaus. *Analyzing social science data: 50 key problems in data analysis.* Sage, 2002.
[11] For a review of existing systems aimed at combining the advantages of qualitative and quantitative methods, see Udo Kelle. "Combining qualitative and quantitative methods in research practice: purposes and advantages." Qualitative research in psychology 3, no. 4 (2006): 293-311.
[12] Matthew B. Miles. "Qualitative data as an attractive nuisance: The problem of analysis." *Administrative science quarterly 24,* no. 4 (1979): 590-601.
[13] For the full questionnaire, please see Annex I.

1. Imagine someone that you would consider to be of a high social class. Please write a few sentences to describe this person. For example: What is their daily life like? What is their background? What possessions do they own? (If you are not sure or disagree with the question, it is fine to say so.)

2. Imagine someone that you would consider to be of a low social class. Please write a few sentences to describe this person. For example: What is their daily life like? What is their background? What possessions do they own? (If you are not sure or disagree with the question, it is fine to say so.)

3. Please indicate the social class that you feel closest to yourself:

The former two questions were open-ended, featuring a text box for respondents to type their answers. The latter gave respondents five tick-boxes:

☐ High
☐ Middle
☐ Low
☐ I don't know
☐ I prefer not to say

The research team made a deliberate decision to use the vaguer term "class" instead of "socioeconomic status" for two reasons. Firstly, in designing open-ended questions, giving greater latitude to respondents generally produces more useful answers. Secondly, because one of the research questions we wished to answer was whether Singaporeans see social status as being determined by behaviour, financial wherewithal, or a combination of both. While behaviour can be interpreted to be covered by the "socio" component of "socioeconomic status", most respondents tend to see the use of the phrase "socioeconomic status" as a cue to focus primarily on the economic component. Using the vaguer term "class" is less likely to push respondents in a particular direction: participants can choose to interpret class in behavioural or financial terms. Moreover, because this choice is spontaneous, it has far greater evidentiary value than it would have were it the product of an implicit "nudge" or an explicit question.[14]

> **I don't quite like the term high or low social class because I think it is a term that is hard to define. To me the term low or high SES is more quantifiable for obvious reasons."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1971

Several versions of the questions were pre-tested with smaller audience to give researchers a sense of the phrasing that would be liable to trigger the most useful answers while introducing the lowest level of researcher bias. In this case, the use of prompts ("What is their daily life like? What is their background? What possessions do they own?") was found to produce much thicker data than a bland request for information ("What is it about them that defines their high class status? Please write a few sentences mentioning all the factors you think are relevant in making a judgment."), which tended to produce standard lists of factors that resembled the textbook list quoted in the introduction, and appeared to be a reflection of conventional sociological judgement on the topic, rather than individual opinion and experience.

[14] While being as up-front as possible with audiences is generally to be encouraged in opinion polling, in this case asking explicitly whether social status is a behavioural or a monetary phenomenon introduces an element of social desirability bias into the questionnaire that would not otherwise be present. Respondents know how they are "supposed" to feel about social status, and will tend to reply in conformity with this knowledge, giving conventionally virtuous answers that privilege character and behaviour over wealth. See Robert J. Fisher. "Social desirability bias and the validity of indirect questioning." *Journal of consumer research 20*, no. 2 (1993): 303-315.

> **I disagree with question. However a lower social class would likely live in a one room rental house, living from hand to foot, does menial jobs like rubbish collector or karang guni man."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1977

Participants were also given the option to disagree with the question or say that they were not sure of the answer, not merely because this is good survey design practice, but also because this is a complex and frequently fraught topic. In the event, only four respondents explicitly criticised the question, though others did so implicitly by refusing the idea of social hierarchy.

Responses were solicited via social media and via a panel responses service. The goal with this was to attract a mixture of opinions, both from people with a pre-existing interest in the topic (whose opinions are generally weighted more heavily in political discussion, simply because they are more likely to assert them and eventually to take action on the same basis) and from those with no immediate interest (whose opinions are often discounted in political discussion, but which can have startling effects at the ballot box). Similarly, the demographics of the respondents were tracked with the aim of creating a sample that would be broadly representative of the general population.[15]

SGD 100,000
Self-declared median household income

SGD 111,516
Estimated median household income

In the event, the sample skewed slightly younger than the general Singaporean population – something to be expected from an online survey. However, the size of the sample means that this skew can be controlled for in analysing the answers. It is also worth noting that the self-declared median household income was, at SGD 100,000, slightly lower than the estimated island-wide median of SGD 111,516.[16] However, self-declared income figures are always approximate and should not (here or elsewhere) be read as a 100% faithful depiction of respondents' financial status.[17]

> **For a person to be consider as low social class, in my opinion, is rather simple and basic."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1961

More information on the demographic characteristics of the respondents can be found in the following section.

538

A total of 538 responses were collected, giving a margin of error of around 4.25% with a confidence level of 95%.

[15] James J. Heckman. "Selection bias and self-selection." *In Econometrics,* pp. 201-224. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1990.
[16] Taken from the Singstat website, retrieved 6 April 2019: https://www.tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg/publicfacing/createDataTable.action?refId=12307
[17] Nan L. Maxwell and Jane S. Lopus. "The Lake Wobegon effect in student self-reported data." *The American Economic Review 84*, no. 2 (1994): 201-205

2. DEMOGRAPHY

538

49.07%

49.63%

?

1.30%

TOTAL RESPONSES: 538

Of the total number of respondents, 49.07% were male, 49.63% were female, and 1.30% selected "other/prefer not to say".
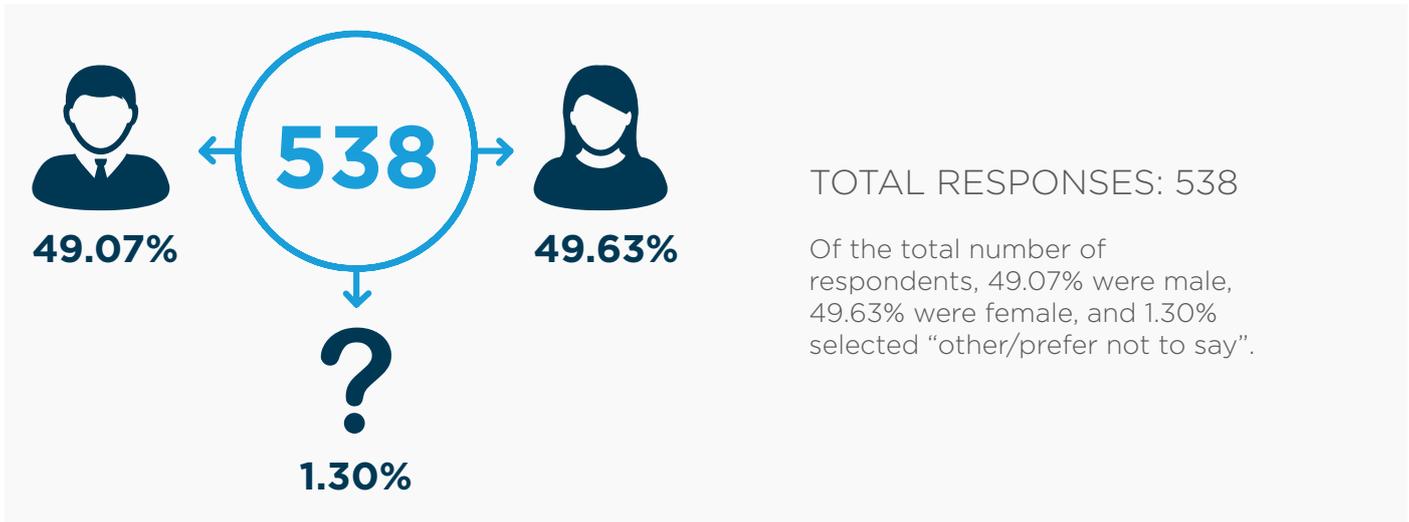
While self-declared household income is, as mentioned above (see Section 2), not necessarily an accurate measure, it can be used to give a general idea of the financial situation of respondents. The lowest self-declared annual income was SGD 0, while the highest was SGD 4,000,000. The median was SGD 100,000.

SGD 4,000,000

SGD 100,000

SGD 0

Respondent Age

Over 60   **5.96%**

51-60

41-50   **12.08%**

31-40

21-30   **15.61%**

Under 20

1.86%

30.11%

34.39%
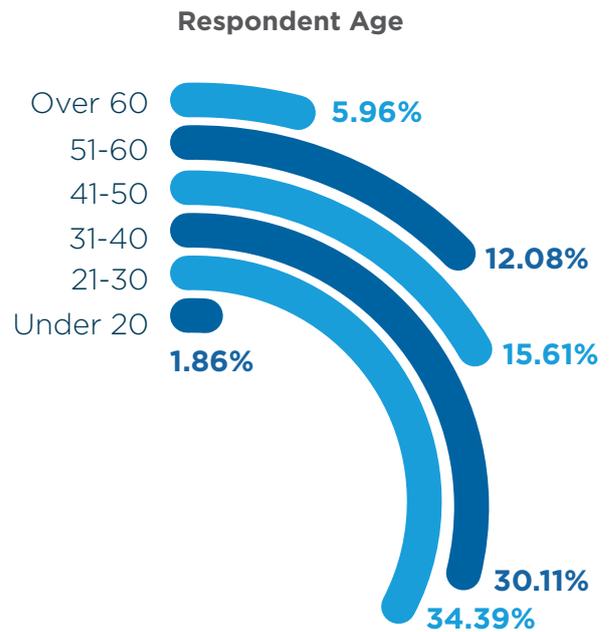
3. CLASS AND INCOME

As is common in surveys, the vast majority of respondents self-identified as middle class.[18]

Respondents' self-identified class

Prefer not to say, **3%**

I don't know, **5%**

Low, **11%**

High, **3%**

Middle, **77%**
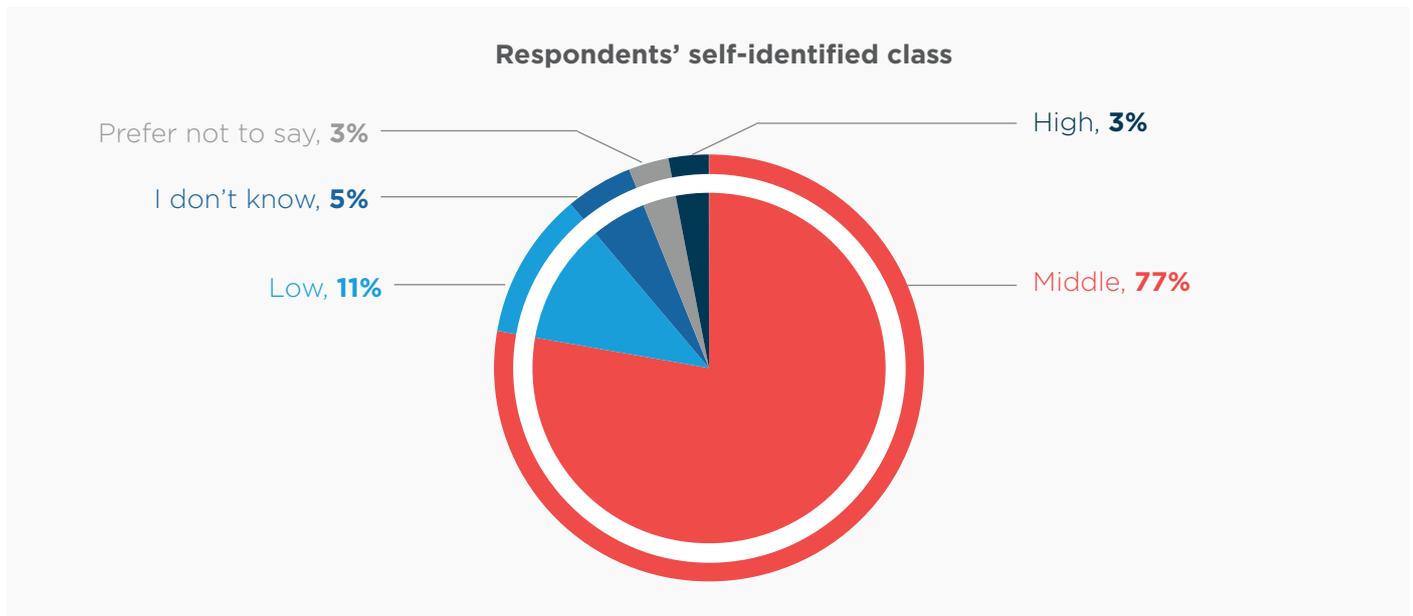
Of more interest were the links between income and self-identified class. While a correlation existed between median yearly self-declared household incomes and self-identified class, it is noteworthy that the participants with the highest incomes self-identified as middle class.

Low $0 $450,000 $40,000

Middle $0 $4,000,000 $100,000

High $18,000 $540,000 $220,000

The highest income in the self-indentified class group was $450,000. Six respondents had higher incomes but self-identified as high class or declined to respond.

*Diagram not to scale
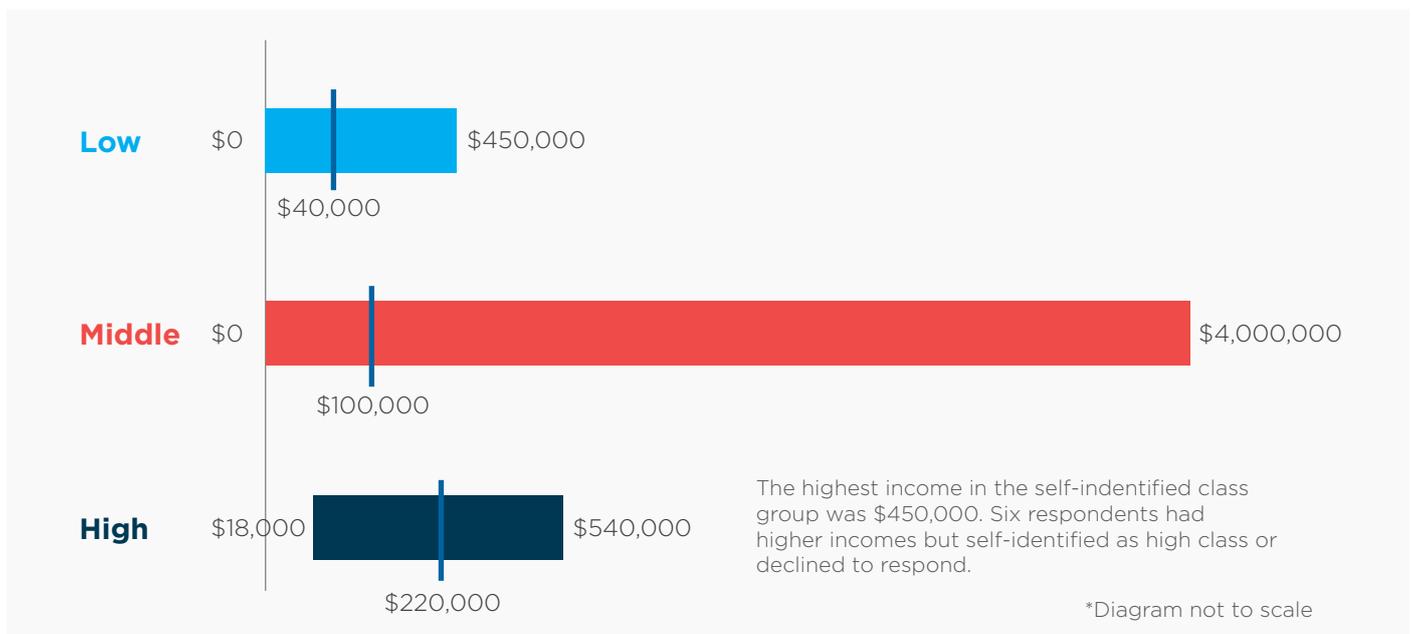
[18] Pew Research Center. "Few with Family Incomes of $100K+ Embrace the Label 'Upper Class'". Retrieved 6 April 2019: https://www.people-press. org/2015/03/04/most-say-government-policies-since-recession-have-done-little-to-help-middle-class-poor/few-with-family-incomes-of-100k-embrace-the-label-upper-class-2/

4. CLASS AND BEHAVIOUR

While the typical response tended to focus on material signifiers of class, a minority of respondents saw class as being partially or wholly determined by character or behaviour. This proportion varied slightly by generation, and the precise linkage drawn between class, wealth and behaviour differed greatly from person to person. Positions can be broken down (with some overlap) into four broad groups, which will be analysed in more detail below:

Class is purely a matter of material prosperity

Wealth and poverty are largely the products of personal character

Wealth and poverty are largely the products of outside circumstances

Wealth and poverty are among the determinants of personal character

Class is purely a matter of behaviour

It was in this field in particular that the open-ended format of the questionnaire demonstrated its utility, allowing respondents to provide "unexpected" results, giving a high level of detail and nuance, and bringing up specific examples or incidents to illustrate their perspectives.

A. WEALTH, POVERTY, CHARACTER AND LUCK

Conventional census-type enquiries into social class tend to focus primarily on income and jobs, with occasionally an educational component included in the data.[19] Other surveys have attempted to incorporate alternative factors. Gallup, for example, used econometric methods to estimate the likelihood of survey respondents assigning themselves to a particular class based upon other social and demographic factors.[20] Alternatively, the BBC used an extensive questionnaire with questions intended to estimate financial, social and cultural capital in an attempt to replace the conventional Nuffield class framework with a more up-to-date and less economically-focused system.[21]

In our survey we deliberately left our use of the term "class" vague. Rather than having researchers list a set of factors that they assumed contributed to defining class and having people answer questions about them, the aim was to allow people to free-associate, and thereby build up a more accurate picture of the relative weighting that the respondent pool attached to different factors.

In the event, 61% of respondents defined class in entirely material terms, but 39% included a behavioural component that they felt accounted for some or all of their perceptions of a person's class.[22] This reflects the "Confucian" idea of class described above, a vision of social hierarchy that is hardly novel but which conventional polls have difficulty incorporating given the difficulty of pinning down non-material contributing factors.

[19] Roger Penn. "The Nuffield class categorization." *Sociology 15*, no. 2 (1981): 265-271.

[20] Robert Bird and Frank Newcome. "What Determines How Americans Perceive Their Social Class?" Gallup. 27 February 2017. Retrieved 6 April 2019: https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/204497/determines-americans-perceive-social-class.aspx

[21] Mike Savage, Fiona Devine, Niall Cunningham, Mark Taylor, Yaojun Li, Johs Hjellbrekke, Brigitte Le Roux, Sam Friedman, and Andrew Miles. "A new model of social class? Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey experiment." *Sociology 47,* no. 2 (2013): 219-250.

[22] References to education and personal networks lie on the border between behavioural and material factors. Given that the majority of respondents described education as a commodity, we did not code it as being a behavioural factor unless a particular respondent chose to emphasise an individual's willingness to study/learn. If education is coded as behavioural in all cases, the "both" segment grows much larger. Similarly, we only coded networks as being a behaviour factor when they choice to associate with particular people was emphasised. In most cases the idea of networks as a product and cause of social reproduction was emphasised. By contrast, language use was more frequently framed as a choice, and thus was coded as behavioural.

Is class a matter of material or behavioural factors?

61%
See class in material terms

3%
See class in behavioural terms

36%
Both

While respondents were divided on the question of whether class is a matter of wealth, behaviour, or both, opinion was similarly divided as to precisely how behaviour and wealth interact to define class. A minority of respondents saw class as being entirely predicated upon good or bad behaviour.

have a very good manner towards others, never insult people with a bad words, always kind to others"

- Male respondent, born 1977, defining high class

Very loud mouthed and rough person. Background due to parents being of the same kind. Possessions could be expensive as rich people can also be rough mannered"

- Female respondent, born 1960, defining low class

Among respondents who referred to both material and behavioural factors in defining class, however, there was a high degree of divergence. Some respondents drew an explicit or implicit link between positive personal qualities and worldly success, suggesting that good character and accomplishments – notably intelligence, generosity, eloquence and honesty - are likely to be rewarded with material success.

Well educated, professional, own private property, car ownership and travel widely. He must show concerns for people and extends help whenever possible monetary or otherwise. Speak softly but with substance as wise man should be. Acknowledgeable and yet humble in dealing with difficult situation. Someone who can be relied on when needs arise."

- Male respondent, born 1952, defining high class

Well to do business owner, lives in a landed property. Appreciate fine arts, socially respected and responsible for other's livelihood. Contributes to development of the society in general."

- Male respondent, born 1960, defining high class

By contrast, a smaller proportion of respondents saw bad behaviour as a negative side effect of material prosperity, which in itself defined high class status. In these answers, class was predicated upon material prosperity, but also linked to bad behaviour. It was notable that these negative perceptions were frequently linked to being out of touch with the difficulties faced by poorer people.

> **Snob! Drives a BMW. Stays in a condo/ landed property. Wears a Rolex. Thinks they are better than others."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1968, defining high class

> **Out of touch and locked within one's ivory tower. Have difficulty understanding why lower income peers might not join them in certain social situations such as a weekend out at a fancy cafe. While condescendingly say, 'I don't understand, it's just a meal at a said café'"**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1995, defining high class

There existed a certain overlap between these respondents and those who saw wealth as more a product of luck than of personal achievements:

> **Person would be catapulted into high positions by connections. Tend to be people who are very concerned with social justice. Tend to not be able to see their privilege while putting down others for their perceived privilege. Lives in a bungalow valued upwards of 10 million. Usually claims to be middle class"**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1992, defining high class

> **Flexible hours, owns a business and at least 1 investment property and come from an at least a well to do family background. That said, many fortunate people does not have the right attitude and empathy to ensure a inclusive society."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1985, defining high class

Opinion was similarly divided when it came to the positive and negative qualities of those in lower income brackets. While some respondents saw poverty as a reflection of a lack of character or of other negative personal qualities, others were more inclined to blame systemic factors, or underline the virtues displayed by those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale, such as humility and industriousness.

> **Speaks in heavy singlish and dialect. Looks worn out (clothes and energy level). Lower level of education. Complains more about life. Narrow minded and negative mindset. Less social life, spends more time working."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1994, defining low class

> **The person could be working hard every day to make ends meet or be lazy and not care at all- generally the former. Their family background would be similar to them since the cycle of poverty likely persisted. Poorly educated. I personally do not take a lack of extravagant possessions to indicate social class unlike the converse which generally holds true in the previous question. Background would be uneducated or poorly educated- not necessarily of their own volition. No aspirations. Under-performer. Unintelligent (since they do not have family wealth to compensate hence they are where they are)."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1995, defining high class

> **simple lifestyle, contented person does not have a car I personally prefer this kind of lifestyle"**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1977, defining low class

It should be noted that having a positive opinion about high class behaviour was not systematically associated with a negative opinion about low class behaviour. Some respondents were equally positive or negative about both groups, while others expressed both positive and negative opinions in the same answer.

> **They are highly educated, eloquent, ambitious, but could also be living in a bubble, blind to the sufferings of the poor, but when accused so they usually deny and complain about their lives, showing how unfortunate they are just as everyone else."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1995, defining high class

Respondents referencing positive behaviours | Respondents referencing negative behaviours

High class: **20.63%** | **3.90%**

Low class: **8.18%** | **27.70%**

The tendency to associate high class with positive attributes and low class with negative ones has important political implications. It implies a relatively low degree of resentment toward the wealthy, and thus that the majority of people are broadly content with the ways in which resources are distributed within society. While some respondents focused on unearned wealth when describing the upper classes, they were a small minority. Interestingly, nine respondents mentioned a tendency to complain as being one of the negative qualities associated with low class status, conveying disapproval of disagreement regarding the fairness of resource allocation.

> **Blue collar worker who goes to work to sustain livelihood. Likely earning less than $40,000 per annum and is in debt for the home with no end in sight for the final payment of the loan. More often than not, complains a lot about life and the government, and is perpetually unhappy. Owns a house and nothing else."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1988, defining low class

> **Work hard but no monetary inputs. Does not spend enough time to pursue their goals and to improve themselves. Complains and see the negative side of all things. Lack grit and aspiration and courage to pursue them. Hdb flat. Public transport. Gonfor cheap possessions instead of value."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1981, defining low class
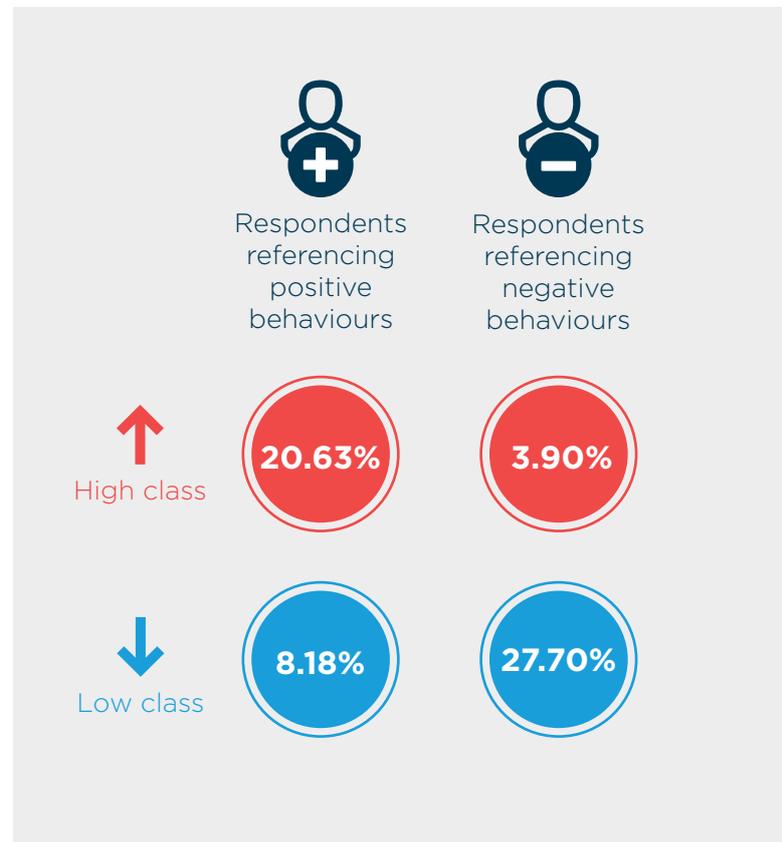
B. WEALTH AND BEHAVIOUR ACROSS THE DEMOGRAPHICS

Generation Z (n=35)

Both 37% | Wealth 63%

Generation X (n=127)

Behaviour 7% | Both 46% | Wealth 47%

Millenials (n=296)

Behaviour 3% | Both 51% | Wealth 46%

Pioneers (n=81)

Behaviour 5% | Both 33% | Wealth 62%
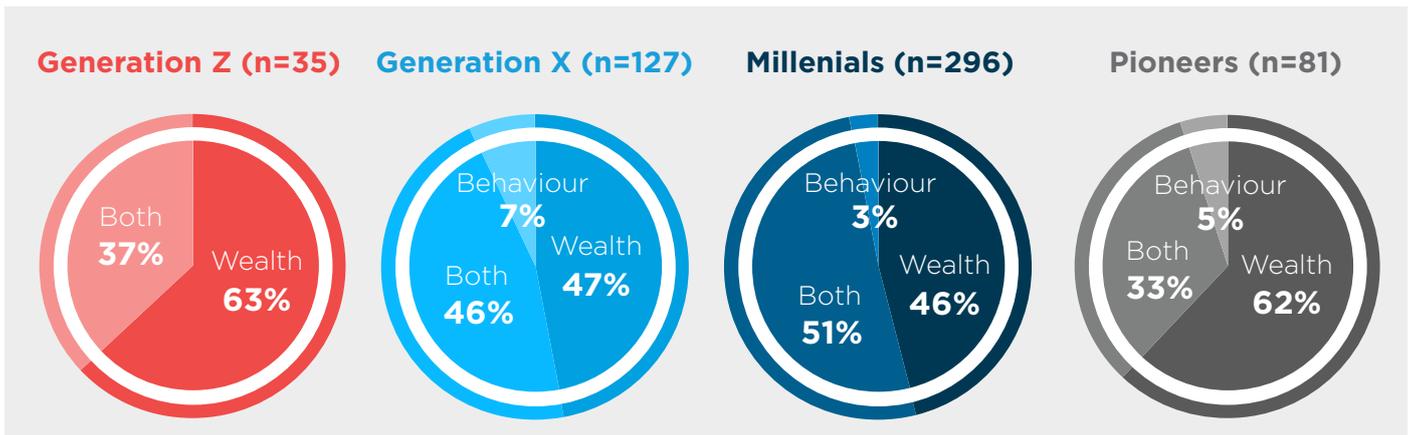
While the same broad proportions of answers referencing material and behavioural factors could be observed across all generations, it appeared weaker among the youngest respondents.[23] Nevertheless, the generational results, while intriguing, should be analysed with caution. Firstly, because the number of respondents in each cohort group is not large enough to produce a reasonable degree of statistical generalisability (therefore it is hard to say with confidence that these results are not the fruit of chance), secondly, because generational effects are difficult or impossible to pin down in a one-off survey. The lack of emphasis on behaviour among younger respondents could indicate that society as a whole is becoming more materialistic. Alternatively, it could show that every generation is more materialistic in their younger years, becoming less so as they age. It could even imply that younger respondents are more likely to interpret the question (as set by someone older than them) as looking for a materialistic answer and duly provide one.

Tendencies to associate high and low class with positive and negative behaviours were similar across the generations:

Millennials and Generation Z

	↑ High class	↓ Low class
Respondents referencing positive behaviours	20.61%	3.33%
Respondents referencing negative behaviours	7.88%	26.67%

Generation X and Pioneers

	↑ High class	↓ Low class
Respondents referencing positive behaviours	21.15%	4.33%
Respondents referencing negative behaviours	8.65%	29.33%

[23] Please note that the generation boundaries here follow those established by Pew Research, with "pioneers" standing in for the baby boomer/silent generation cohort used in U.S. demographics: http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/

Women showed a slightly reduced tendency to link class with behaviour, with 47.19% of female respondents citing behaviour as accounting for some or all of their perceptions regarding others' status, as compared with 53.79% of male respondents. However, this too should be treated with appropriate caution in light of the respective group sizes.[24]

53.79%   **47.19%**

59.26%   **45.19%**   **54.07%**   **44.03%**
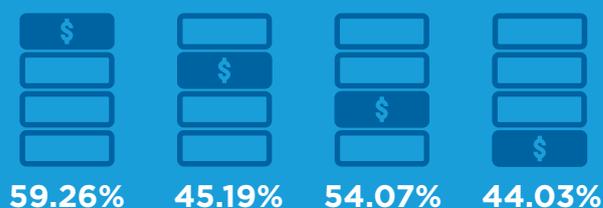
Interestingly, respondents who placed themselves in the highest income quartile were more likely than others to indicate that behaviour accounts for some or all of their perception of others' class status, with 59.26% of respondents mentioning it.[25] The rate was 44.03% in the lowest quartile, 45.19% in the second, and 54.07% in the third.

C. THE VALUE OF CONCRETE EXAMPLES

While the primary goal of this survey was to collect qualitative data in such a way as to be able to convert the results into generalisable statistics, the use of qualitative data as primary material has the added advantage, described above, of allowing respondents to reply in a way that had not necessarily been anticipated by the researchers. Under such circumstances, it is often the answers that resist formal classification that provide the greatest academic utility, insofar as that they have the power to challenge the researchers' fundamental assumptions on the topic.

While not necessarily being statistically representative, such responses frequently have great value in terms of communicating the results in a way that is immediately comprehensible to any audience. The generation of this type of response was an important factor in designing the questionnaire.

Some respondents, for example, took the opportunity to praise or apostrophise particular individuals:

> **My best friend is caring, kind and sincere. She will contact me very day to find out how I'm doing. She is 60 years old and still working as cleaner. The salary is not much but she needs the money to support herself."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1954, defining high class

> **my neighbour, they are classless, lack any ethics and think they are royalty, but only in their puny little minds."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1970, defining low class

> **N R Naryan Murthy who spent his time after retirement to serve poor peoples"**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1962, defining high class

> **Me. :(Public transport everyday, roasted by my family daily to study hard to get a scholarship. Once in a few weeks eat at restaurant."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1998, defining low class

Other respondents provided brief descriptions of great vividness, likely to strike a chord immediately with anyone who has encountered the same circumstances.

> **Have to think or plan the most affordable transportation route even if it means taking a longer time or effort. Eg cycle or walk to mrt station instead of taking the feeder bus."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1983, defining low class

[24] If male and female respondents are treated as separate groups, the margin of error rises to around 6%, or a little more than the difference actually identified.

[25] In this case the difference is larger than the estimated margin of error per cohort (8%), implying that some difference is present, though leaving a certain level of doubt regarding its precise extent.

" 18 yo but has a car. Eats at expensive restaurant. Flex everyday on Instagram about their stuff. Generally useless too."

- Female respondent, born 1998, defining high class

" My mother relies on her children for financial support. She worked at home her whole life and didnt have much savings. Today she takes public transport everywhere. Her children are the samdwiched class. She doesnt own any property."

- Female respondent, born 1970, defining low class

" Unable to make full use of bulk discounts at supermarkets because you only have enough for what you need."

- Female respondent, born 1992, defining low class

" Parents picking them up from school. Stationery is expensive ones. Afford full meals at morning canteen break and lunch break, with spare to buy 100plus."

- Male respondent, born 1987, defining high class

While such responses do not have more statistical or probative value than any other, their utility from a scientific communication perspective is significant. Particularly in the policy field, where research has the capacity to modify that which is researched, the facility for communicating results should not be underestimated.[26]

---

[26] Alexa Spence and Nick Pidgeon. "Framing and communicating climate change: The effects of distance and outcome frame manipulations." *Global Environmental Change 20*, no. 4 (2010): 656-667.

5. COMPONENTS OF CLASS

Percentage of respondents mentioning each contributing factor

Factor	Percentage
Job/Source of income	65.99%
Housing	42.94%
Education	35.32%
Family	29.93%
Car	26.02%
Holidays/Travel	13.94%
Language	9.85%
Networks	9.85%
Domestic Helper	8.74%
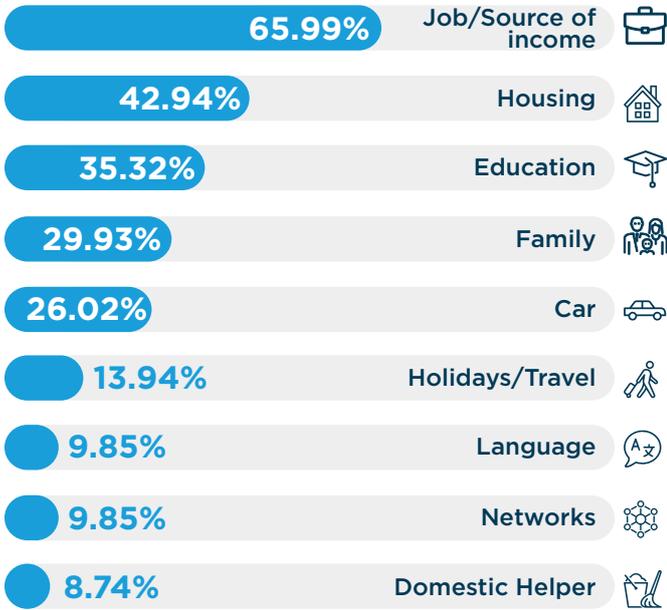
Unsurprisingly, the item cited most frequently by respondents was income (cited by 65.99% of respondents) – whether from jobs, capital gains, welfare, or in the form of its absence. Housing (42.94% of respondents) came a close second, though respondents were somewhat divided as to precisely what can be said to constitute high and low class accommodation. This was followed by education (35.32% of respondents), a topic that was closely linked by many respondents to personal networks (9.85% of respondents). Family (29.93% of respondents) was generally seen as having a multiplier effect: compounding both wealth and poverty. This was linked to the ability or inability to afford a domestic helper to take on chores and childcare (8.74% of respondents). Cars (26.02% of respondents) were no longer necessarily seen as a sign of wealth in and of themselves, possibly reflecting wider car ownership among the lower income percentiles in Singapore. Instead, owning more than one car, or a European model, was seen as the key sign of high class, while owning a Japanese or Korean car was mentioned by a small number of respondents as lower class. Similarly, where travel and holidays (13.94% of respondents) were mentioned, it was often in the context of specifying high or low class destinations, rather than in terms of ability or inability to pay for holidays at all. Finally, language (9.85% of respondents) was also seen as a class signifier, whether in terms of the language spoken (English, Singlish, mother tongues or dialects) or in terms of general eloquence and fluency.

A. ALL ABOUT THE MONEY: INCOME AND CLASS

Among our respondents, 65.99% mentioned jobs and other forms of income as determinants of class. As could be expected, respondents diverged when it came to the precise income brackets defined as high class – the amounts cited varied between SGD 5000 and SGD 83,000 per month, with the median being around SGD 15,000. There was less disagreement about what could be considered a low class income level. Suggested amounts went from "less than SGD 1000 per month" to "SGD 3000 to 5000", with the media being around SGD 2000.

> **CEO equivalent positions. Assets such as landed property and branded car(s). Frequent traveller. Usually family business or asset inherited and passed down the line."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1997, defining high class

High class
SGD 83,000
SGD 15,000
SGD 5000

Low class
SGD 3000 to 5000
SGD 2000
less than SGD 1000

Other respondents evaluated wealth as a stock rather than a flow, describing as high class individuals with "tens if not hundreds of thousands of dollars in liquidity", "family nett worth exceeding $30M", "savings of 200k by 30 years old", "cash and liquid assets amount to more than $500k", "net worth of at least 5 million Singapore dollars, including property", or "conglomerates with holdings in the Billions of dollars". Conversely, several respondents defined low class in terms of having no savings.

There was some divergence when it came to the types of income stream that could be considered high class. Among the responses we found 160 mentions of jobs or paid labour in some form, with law, medicine, the civil service and private sector managerial roles being the most frequently cited. Passive income – whether in the form of investments or family wealth – was mentioned 89 times, with business ownership achieving 64 mentions.

Specific jobs were rarely cited as being low class, though long hours, shift work, short-term contracts and hourly pay were all mentioned frequently.

While public assistance was mentioned by some respondents, it occurred far less frequently than low-paid work.

Interestingly, despite Singapore having one of the world's highest female labour force participation rates, no having to work was cited as being the high class ideal for women were more frequently than for men.

> **big landed property, big car, luxurious home environment, employs maids, travels to Europe often, children go to elite schools, generally speaks well, appreciates the arts, the wife may be busy taking their children thru their daily routine and pampering them, sending them to ballet or music classes, to and back from school, mandatory holidays to disneyland and such.**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1963, defining high class

> **she met and married a wealthy businessman. She will groom herself well to attend many social events. She goes to spas, to facial, mani & pedicures and hair salons. Also goes to luxury and branded boutiques to pick out her wardrobe and accessories and then to teas with friends. Sometimes she plays mahjong. Travels to Europe yearly for her wardrobe and accessories. Travels first or business classes to anywhere she desires. Live in a big bungalow and own properties. She has maids and gets chauffeured around. Own expensive jewellery, branded goods, luxury cars, club memberships and even a yacht. She also runs a few businesses."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1961, defining high class

B. THIS IS HOME: HOUSING AND CLASS

Housing was the second most frequently-referenced class marker, appearing in 42.94% of responses. As with income, a greater diversity of types of housing were associated with high class lifestyles than with low status living.

> **Huge house somewhere inaccessible, on Nassim Hill for example. They have a separate house for their maids (plural). Head of household probably has swanky job in finance or they have family business in something boring such as steel or plastic or paper. They go to work everyday because wealth don't come cheap. Unless they come from old money, and I don't know what those people do daily."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1992, defining high class

Type of housing	References
Landed property	111
Condo	64
Bungalow	33
Five-room HDB	2
Maisonette	1
Loft	1
Shophouse	1
Holiday home	1
Semi-detached house	1
Terraced house	1

Particular regions were also cited by respondents as being high class: Bukit Timah, Nassim Road, Tanglin, Orchard, Botanic Gardens, East Coast, Beauty World, Sentosa Cove, Marine Parade, River Valley, Sentosa, East Side, Oxley Road, Sixth Avenue, District 9, District 10. District 11, District 16 and Dover. Interestingly, one respondent mentioned the lack of public transport options as being a defining feature of high class areas:

Reflecting the predominance of the state in the low-income housing sector, the only housing option mentioned in relation to low class status was the HDB flat. Nevertheless, it is worth clarifying that this does not necessarily mean to imply that all inhabitants of HDB flats should be seen as low class (this would include over 80% of the total population). Indeed, as remarked above, the larger public housing units were seen as a high status option by some participants. Respondents generally took care to specify the precise type of housing they were referring to, with rental being seen as lower status than home-ownership, and having fewer rooms or high occupancy rates also being seen as indicators of low status.

While mentions of low-class housing options stretched from homelessness (mentioned by six respondents) to four-room HDB flats, two-room flats were the option mentioned most frequently. Few specific areas were mentioned, probably as a reflection of the Singapore government's deliberate policy of zoning to oblige low- and high-income residents to exist in relatively close proximity. The only neighbourhoods cited by name were Boon Lay, Telok Blangah, Jurong, Sengkang and Woodlands.

C. EDUCATION: A SOURCE OF ADVANCEMENT OR STAGNATION?

Unsurprisingly, given how contentious an issue academic competition has always been in Singapore, responses touching upon education were among the most complex and clearly political of all the answers received, making up 35.32% of the total.

While the links between education and social class in Singapore have already been studied in-depth by Quah et al. (1991), opinions are liable to change quickly on such a sensitive subject, meaning that the current study has the capacity to serve as a useful update.[27]

Interestingly, and unlike in many countries, school was seen as a far greater determinant of class than university – potentially a legacy of the British heritage and public school ethos within the Singapore education system. While schools (whether in general or in the form of specific institutions) were mentioned 124 times among the responses, universities and other further education institutes were mentioned only 37 times. While respondents tended to focus on local independent schools as markers of high class status - with the Anglo-Chinese School and Raffles Institution being mentioned most frequently - foreign universities were mentioned more frequently than local ones. Foreign universities were specified 15 times in total, with only four respondents mentioning local universities.

> " ... **have several children in a household. Probably still have smart phones because those are now considered a necessity. Many of their extended family are probably also in the same situation, because it is a viscous cycle and hard to escape from. The probably go to work or school or both. Children go to community center after school for tuition with social workers...**"
>
> - Female respondent, born 1973, defining low class

124 mentioned
SCHOOL

37 mentioned
UNIVERSITIES (in general)

4
LOCAL UNIVERSITIES

15
FOREIGN UNIVERSITIES

The others did not specify.

---

[27] Stella R. Quah, Seen Kong Chiew, Yiu Chung Ko, and Sharon Mengchee Lee. "Social class in Singapore." Singapore: Centre for Advanced Studies, 1991.
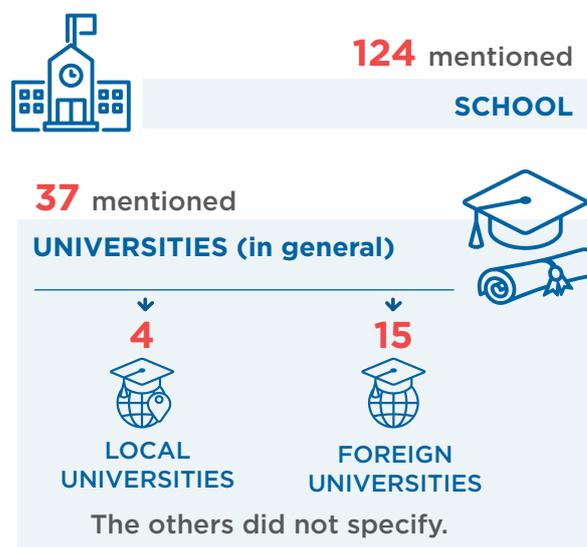
While we did not code answers mentioning education or particular schools as being references to networking unless the respondents explicitly stated as much, the link was often implied to various degrees.[28] Many respondents also linked education to family, whether because wealthy families were seen as putting more emphasis on education, or because – despite a wide variety of state subsidies – access to the independent local schools and foreign universities that define high class status was perceived as being more difficult for those lacking in financial resources. Several respondents mentioned the need for children to attend tutoring sessions outside of school in order to score the marks required to gain access to coveted elite school places, while others emphasised on the need for children in poorer families to begin working as soon as possible to contribute to the family finances.

> **White collared job. Owns a car. Limited social circle. Broadly owning the five 5Cs, but with emphasis on having a tremendous amount of mobility within and beyond Singapore. Likely to come from well-resourced schools enjoying good connections with alumni and other networks.”**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1991, defining high class

This in turn has significant implications when it comes to popular perceptions of inequality. While media and academic opinion - both in Singapore and elsewhere - frequently attributes social discontent and political instability to inequality alone, data from the U.S. Europe shows that elite turnover is – if anything – a more important factor in popular perceptions. Thus, while the U.S. has high levels of inequality, U.S. citizens are relatively sanguine about the fact, as the high rate of elite turnover means that even the poorest citizens know they stand a reasonable chance of spending some time among the top percentiles. By contrast, inequality in Europe is lower, but resented with far more intensity because the rate of elite turnover is low.[29]

As a relatively young nation, elite stagnation has not had time to become a significant problem for Singapore. Nevertheless, it has long been a key concern of the government, with ministers and high ranking civil servants frequently stressing the need to prevent the nation's much-lauded meritocracy from degenerating into mere elitism.[30] While an emphasis on education as a means for entering the upper classes may been seen as a reflection

> **They studied in top schools. They go to their white collar role in a leadership position which is well networked with the same people who went to school with them. They live in private estates with at least 2 cars in their household.”**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1992, defining high class

that the Singaporean meritocratic elite turnover systems are still functioning as intended, this must necessarily be nuanced by the emphasis that a significant number of respondents placed upon the role played by personal networks and family background in ensuring access to education, as mentioned above and discussed in more detail below (section 5D). Nevertheless, the relatively low levels of resentment towards those perceived as high class (see sections 4A and B above) implies that while people may acknowledge the role of family in securing a good education for their children, family as a factor does not bias the system to a degree that is considered unacceptable by most respondents.

[28] Vincent Chua. "Social networks and labour market outcomes in a meritocracy." *Social Networks 33*, no. 1 (2011): 1-11
[29] Nassim Nicholas Taleb. *Skin in the game: Hidden asymmetries in daily life.* Random House, 2018.
[30] Leonel Lim. "Meritocracy, elitism, and egalitarianism: a preliminary and provisional assessment of Singapore's primary education review." *Asia Pacific Journal of Education 33*, no. 1 (2013): 1-14.

D. FAMILY: A CLASS MULTIPLIER

While the Singapore government puts a great deal of emphasis on the nation's meritocratic education and employment systems, family was mentioned by 29.93% of participants as having an effect on social status.[31] Frequently it was seen as having a multiplier effect on material prosperity, compounding difficulties among the worst-off and reinforcing benefits among the elite. Some respondents mentioned inherited wealth explicitly in their answers:

> **English speaking with convent/ Katong accent or old Chinese elite business family. More than one domestic helper. Car for each adult family member. More than one property."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1981, defining high class

> **CEO equivalent positions. Assets such as landed property and branded car(s). Frequent traveller. Usually family business or asset inherited and passed down the line."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1997, defining high class

At the opposite end of the scale, the cost of supporting family was occasionally cited as a factor holding those of low status back.

> **constantly worried about livelihood, eager to upgrade her/his skills, working to pay endless loans - house loan, car loan, student loan, bills of aging parents' healthcare or special needs child or acquired disability, struggle to natch up"**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1968, defining low class

> **this person may be doing odd jobs and does not have stable income. He/she may be a single child and has to support disabled/elderly parents"**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1978, defining low class

A greater proportion of respondents, however, described family's influence on social status via the mediating factor of education (see also section 5C above). Rich families were seen as having the time, energy and resources to devote to their children's education.

> **Stays in private housing, travels in continental cars, do not have to bother about daily menial tasks, holiday twice a year to places that require air travel generally degree holder and above, with time afforded for leisure pursuits even during working days, discuss skiing holidays, latest gadgets and indulge in fine wine or whiskey. Children goes for enrichment classes after school or during weekend, being afforded the best education opportunities."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1972, defining high class

> **Lives in a condo / landed property. Has a family car. Spends money freely (do not have to think twice about getting a drink at school). Careless with their material possesions. Well educated by family (investing, skin care, practical advices to grow wealth)"**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1997, defining high class

---

31 Ibid.

> **Long working hours, travel via public transport or even PMDs and bicycles, generally secondary school education, generally from careers that have limited progression, stays in 2-3 room public housing shared with many extended family members (even rented homes), may have mobile phones but generally worn and outdated on prepaid plans. Children on FAS but with no energy, time or intellect to coach them in schoolwork."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1975, defining low class

The need for poorer children to work part time to support the family was seen as a blow to their educational prospects. Several respondents mentioned that while poorer families may cherish academic aspirations for their children, it is - despite the numerous state programmes put in place by the government to facilitate access to high-level education for poorer families – harder for them to realise these dreams.

> **Blue-collared workers with odd hours/ shift jobs and poor career progression. Likely to be less highly educated, and less likely to be able - despite wanting - to support their children to higher education. Likely not to own cars but may own motorcycles or vans. Likely to be living in rental flats."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1992, defining low class

> **lives in hdb 3rm or below, earning frm hand to mouth, still have bread and butter issues, sacrifices education for breadbutter issues, on comcare"**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1971, defining low class

This sentiment was not universal, however. Other respondents criticised low status families for failing to put sufficient effort into self-improvement for themselves and their children.

> **Busy, shift work perhaps, lack of support from family for education. Own televisions, game console. Children may be in NA or NT streams at school"**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1982, defining low class

> **Live in rental flats. Doing odd jobs and does not stay low in a job. Will only work when he has no more money. Smoke a lot/drink beer. From Low income family with no proper guidance since young."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1984, defining low class

Despite the Singapore government's best efforts to increase the birth rate, large families tended to be seen as an indicator of low class, whether because they were perceived as stretching the household's resources or merely in and of themselves.[32] This in turn was linked to the ability or inability to afford the services of a domestic helper (mentioned by 8.74% of respondents) – another multiplier. Families in which a domestic helper takes on the chores and childcare are more likely to benefit from a dual income stream, and thus a better overall status (though this should be contrasted with those respondents who imagined elite women as stay-at-home wives – see part 5A above). Conversely, families in which one parent has to remain at home lose out on additional income.

> **Runs a successful business. Owns landed properties and luxury cars. Probably has a small family. House has domestic helpers to do housework.”**

\- Female respondent, born 1992, defining high class

> **Spends more time at work as they need more money. Grumbles more about the government. Worries about daily expenses. Have to juggle work and taking care of kids as they unable to hire a domestic helper. They may not own much, and live in simpler HDB flats.”**

\- Gender not stated, born 1991, defining low class

> **Based on my experiences volunteering with people who are literally so poor they can't afford basic utilities or milk for their baby, they are mostly stuck in a cycle of poverty, do not have much formal education, are trapped in destructive relationships that leave them saddled with tons of kids they can't afford to raise or feed. I'm talking the beneficiaries I visit who live in 1 room rental flats. Some of them have mental illness but lack the understanding of how to treat it. They're also regular humans but lack the access to a lot of opportunities that are easily afforded to people of better means.”**

\- Female respondent, born 1985, defining low class

This raises some interesting questions concerning the government's pro-natalist policies. Having children has frequently been presented as a social duty; could a better solution to the birth-rate problem be to promote large families as the ultimate luxury good?

---

[32] Theresa Wong, and Brenda SA Yeoh. *Fertility and the family: An overview of pro-natalist population policies in Singapore.* Singapore: Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis, 2003.

E. CARS: THE THIRD C

The 5Cs (cash, car, credit card, condominium and country club membership) were all mentioned among our responses, with cars coming in third place, mentioned by 26.02% of respondents, after cash (see section 5A) and condos (section 5B).

The brands most frequently cited as being signifiers of high class status were BMW (16 mentions) and Mercedes (14 mentions), with European brands being by far the most frequently cited (for more information on brands as class markers, see section 6 below).

Ownership of cars was not seen by all respondents as being inherently high class. Three respondents specifically mentioned Japanese and Korean cars as being low class options, though interestingly, one respondent also mentioned the use of small Japanese cars as city run-arounds by high status individuals.

Concerning the other two Cs, clubs were mentioned 26 times, while credit cards only notched up six mentions.

F. TIME IS MONEY: HOLIDAYS AND LEISURE

While 13.94% of respondents mentioned travel and holidays as a class signifier, choice of destination was mentioned more frequently than the fact of having or lacking the resources to go abroad at all. While nine responses mentioned the inability to take holidays as a defining factor in low class status, 14 mentioned cheap holidays or holidays to regional destinations.

> **Hdb flat, low income, no savings, bet on 4D. Could have up to university education, but holding a $3-5k job. Working class parents, speaks bad English, reads lianhe wanbao, dreams of winning Toto. Holiday in Bangkok, Taiwan, HK. Cuts coupons to shop at NTUC."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1972, defining low class

> **menial jobs, public housing, uses public transport, reside in heartlands area, blue collar jobs, little or no opportunity to travel overseas on holidays. probably the farthest is malaysia. by coach instead of by air"**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1956, defining low class

Low status destinations mentioned included Bali, Bangkok, Hong Kong, China, Johor Bahru, Malaysia (in general), Thailand, Batam and Bintan.

At the opposite end of the scale, Europe and Japan were seen as being high class destinations, with Africa and the U.S. also being mentioned. Business travel and travel for education were also cited as being signifiers of high class, as was travel with the aim of enjoying a particular hobby – notably skiing and diving.

Travel aside, leisure activities were clearly divided across class lines. Golf was the most frequently-cited leisure activity for high status individuals (15 mentions), with kopitiams occupying the same place for those of low status (12 mentions).

Other activities associated with high class status included yoga, gym membership, the arts and fine dining. "Low class" hobbies included watching television and karaoke.

While the leisure activities and travel choices mentioned were highly diverse, one thread that ran through many of the responses was the strong correlation between money and time. Many respondents saw wealth as providing not just the resources to indulge in expensive hobbies such as golf or skiing, but also – and possibly more crucially – the time. This factor was also related to income sources: passive income and high-level managerial positions were frequently seen as providing flexibility and free time in a way that low-wage jobs do not.

> " **Has no private space, no hobbies, eat instant noodles everyday, have to borrow $ all the time, family argues about $ everyday, not having enough pocket $ for school, cannot hang out with friends because parents do not have enough $ to give me"**
> - Female respondent, born 1994, defining low class

> " **a lot of free time, lives in a huge house and drives a branded car, travels for leisure often, uses branded stuff such as handbags, works in nice air-con buildings, usually happy, has friends of same background"**
> - Female respondent, born 1989, defining high class

> **Rental flat, similar possessions/gadgets. Lack of time is the main problem, no one to take care of kids, can't take time off work because in a job that doesn't allow that. Very low wages, a bad month with unexpected expenses (say illness, loss of job) will cause huge issues."**
>
> - Gender not stated, born 1982, defining low class

> **Always trying out new things, new activities, the trendiest food, etc. Possess the latest gadgets and products. Able to buy time with conveniences such as helper at home, dedicated gym pass, taxi rides."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1983, defining high class

Gruelling work was frequently seen as the defining characteristic of low-status lifestyles.

> **Humble, hardworking. HDB home, no car. No overseas education, functional lifestyle with no opportunities to splurge."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1991, defining low class

> **Work as hard as the rich, (everyone in spore works like crazy people since we r a pharoah nation) v concern about money, min holiday, stressful to be around, normal ie handphone, tv,"**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1965, defining low class

> **They would work multiple jobs, live with extended family e.g. such as uncles and aunts and cousins, or live in a rental flat. They would not be able to afford time to spend with the family, and you would not see them anywhere in parks or public spaces. Most of their time would be spent at work, where they are probably in the cleaning, or construction industry earning barely 2000 a month."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1994, defining low class

A smaller proportion of respondents emphasised the hard work required to maintain a high class lifestyle, or accused those of low status of having failed to work hard enough to secure material prosperity.

> **Enjoying quality food, hardly have free time, hectic lifestyle, things with some branding. Are very willing to learn new things, are socially aware of the surroundings."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1999, defining high class

> **A person who is of a low social class is someone who spunge on others. He is lazy to hold a job or work hard for a living. Naturally he is one who does not care for others nor does he mix well. He is self-centred. Maybe due to his nature, he may not have a lot o possessions."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1946, defining low class

G. SILVER TONGUES: THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

Language has long been a crucial signifier of class status in spoken and written conversion, but its weight in making overall judgments is extremely difficult to judge. It has thus been neglected to a great degree by previous surveys (see part 4A above). Depending on the society involved, language, accent, fluency and choice of vocabulary can all play an important role as class markers.[33]

In the Singapore case, 8.74% of respondents mentioned language as being an indicator of class. English was seen as being a signifier of high class status (mentioned by 29 respondents), particularly when spoken with a foreign accent. Two respondents mentioned Singlish, with one specifying the ability to code-switch between the two as a sign of high class status.
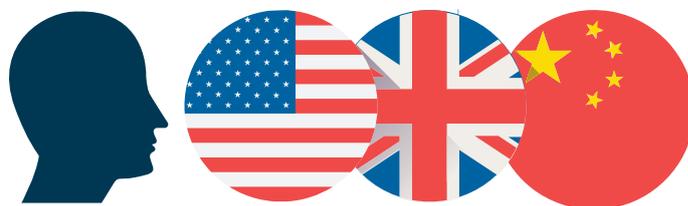
While eight respondents suggested that those of high-class status are more likely to be Chinese, three cited non-specific immigrants, and one mentioned Indians, no other languages were mentioned as being associated with high class status. In fact, when mother tongue languages (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) and dialects were mentioned, it was almost always in the context of low class status – only one respondent suggested that high class Singaporeans may "speak good English or mother tongue". Nuancing this slightly is the fact that previous research has indicated that a tendency to put a higher value on English than other languages is itself a marker of higher socioeconomic status (Bokhorst-Heng and Santos Caleon, 2008), hinting that respondents who did so may – in part – have been displaying class-marker behaviour themselves.[34]

Interestingly, the degree of eloquence or fluency achieved by an individual was seen as being – if anything – more important than the language used. The use of fluency as a class marker has been observed elsewhere; in one study non-French speakers were able to guess the social class of French-Canadian speakers with a degree of accuracy equivalent to a correlation of 0.7, only 0.1 percentage point lower than native speakers (Brown and Lambert, 1976).[35] In the present study, a total of 45 respondents mentioned fluency, eloquence or speaking well in their responses. While occasionally an implicit link was drawn between persuasive abilities and the capacity to succeed in work or business, this was not usual, and skill in speaking was more frequently valued apparently for its own sake.

> **Depends on their age. Generally, lives in landed property, likely Bukit Timah/Orchard. If still studying, will not necessarily wear expensive clothes/bags/watches. Not self-conscious about speaking at all. Mostly speaks Singaporean English with 'lahs' and 'lors', etc, but without mixing in dialect words. Will be in white-collar profession but may be heavily involved in artistic endeavours. Will invariably have domestic helper(s). Is aware of Western cultural canons (literary/musical/artistic) even they can't be bothered with them. Owns books, willing to buy books, or at least visits the library. Can discuss The Economist and Mothership equally."**

- Female respondent, born 1996, defining high class

---

[33] SLynda Mugglestone. *Talking proper: The rise of accent as social symbol.* Oxford University Press on Demand, 2003.
[34] Wendy D. Bokhorst-Heng and Imelda Santos Caleon. "The language attitudes of bilingual youth in multilingual Singapore." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development 30*, no. 3 (2009): 235-251.
[35] Bruce L. Brown and Wallace E. Lambert. "A cross-cultural study of social status markers in speech." *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement 8,* no. 1 (1976): 39.

> **Educated overseas, live in prestigious neighbourhoods, sophisticated tastes. Speaks well, either with a neutral accent or some faux British or American accent. Wears clothes from exclusive brands that are not easily available in stores, custom makes daily items like bags clothes etc., fair and sharp features (plastic surgery lol),"**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1986, defining high class

Eight respondents also mentioned speaking loudly as an indicator of low class status, while others referred specifically to the use of vulgar language.

> **travel in public transport. Use coarse language. lack emotional restrain, talk loudly in public places,"**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1973, defining low class

Considered as an ensemble, responses focusing on language also came together to provide one of the most touching depictions of the compounding disadvantages suffered by the least well-off in society. Descriptions of low class Singaporeans as lacking fluency in any language effectively portrayed them as being subject to an unending linguistic catch-22: anyone who struggles in navigating multiple languages and registers is prevented from expressing the nature of their own situation persuasively, and is likely to be judged by many listeners on the tone of their speech rather than the content. Such individuals are liable, ironically, to find themselves condemned by their arguments in their own defence.

6. BRANDS AS CLASS MARKERS

Branded goods were cited by a large number of respondents as markers of class. Indeed, they were cited with such frequency that it was possible to track the mentions of the brands associated with high class status and thereby follow evolving tastes and priorities across the generations.

Unsurprisingly, given the data reviewed above, cars and schools were the brands most frequently mentioned. Mentions of schools peaked among the later members of generation X and the earlier

millennials – unsurprising given that this cohort is young enough to remember their own school days clearly, while also being the most likely to have young children themselves.

As millennials gave way to generation Z, preferences and priorities begin to change, with schools and cars ceding ground to a degree in favour of smaller ticket items, such as social media bragging rights and gym memberships.

HIGHER SES

Pioneers Generation X Millenials Generation Z

Some brands were also mentioned in connection with low class status, though to a far lesser degree.
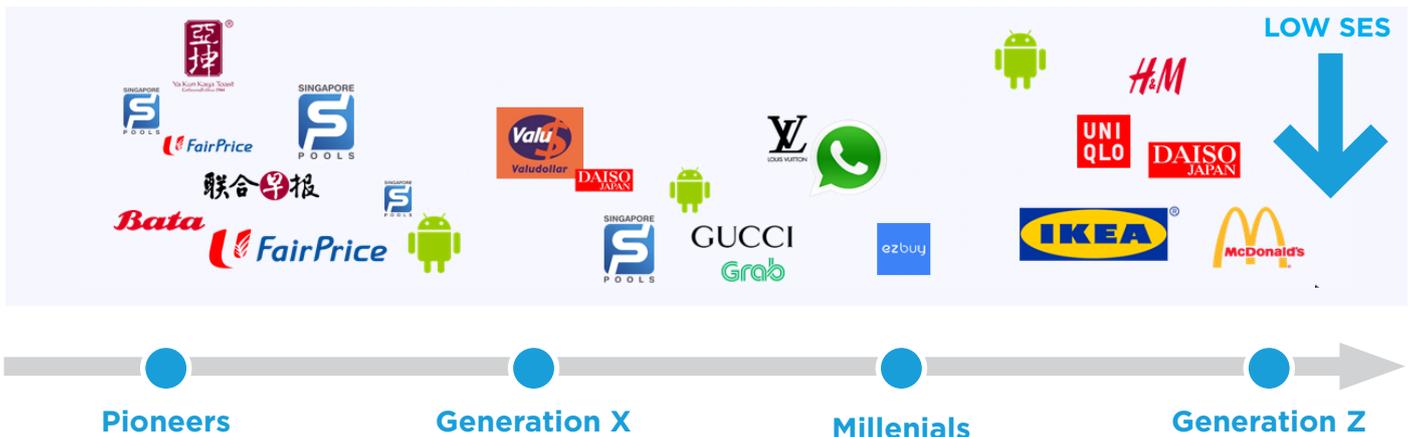
LOW SES

Pioneers Generation X Millenials Generation Z

> Interestingly, certain brands were cited as signifiers of both low and high class status: Grab, Uniqlo, Louis Vuitton and Gucci.
>
> (Among non-branded consumables, only cai png enjoyed this privilege.)

Interestingly, certain brands were cited as signifiers of both low and high class status: Grab, Uniqlo, Louis Vuitton and Gucci. (Among non-branded consumables, only cai png enjoyed this privilege.) While low class status should not worry most of the companies involved, which tend to be ones that consciously target their products at lower income brackets, the mentions of Louis Vuitton and Gucci would seem to indicate that the prevalence of forgeries on the market has – as the companies themselves feared – contributed to lowering the cachet of the originals.[36]

Taking this position even further, a minority of respondents rejected the idea of brands as status markers altogether.

> **Someone with grace and polish, polite, dress well,(not tacky with branded stuff). Has proper social graces"**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1979, defining high class

> **They work in F&B, retail, nursing, jobs with long hours, low flexibility and low pay. They may have grown up in small hdb flats, speak more Chinese or mother tongue language, they own tasteless luxury or wannabe brands but fail to look good and put together, they chase the latest trends and new restaurant openings, anything that is an affordable luxury and break from the norm, they don't usually earn a car or if they do they're paying through their noses. They own cheap badly made clothes and furniture, anything that looks flashy but isn't substantial and made of good materials, they put too much makeup because a poor diet and lack of time (or a stay at home mum/spouse) to prepare good meals likely results in bad skin and extra weight. They don't attend expensive gym classes because that's only for the rich who can afford personalized attention."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1989, defining low class

36 R. Gosline. "Rethinking Brand Contamination: How Consumers Maintain Distinction When Symbolic Boundaries Are Breached." *New England Marketing Consortium 9* (2009).

7. THE DOG THAT DIDN'T BARK: WHAT WENT UNSAID?

A significant advantage of using open-ended survey questions is that they allow researchers to observe what is not mentioned, as well as what is. In this case, several topics were – possibly surprisingly - ignored by all or most of the respondents in a way that would not necessarily be the case in other countries.

A. ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DIVISIONS

In light of the resurgence of (partially economically-driven) ethnic and religious divisions elsewhere in the world, the low number of respondents mentioning them in this survey can potentially be considered a victory for the Singapore government's highly interventionist multicultural policies.

> **Well dressed, groomed. Well educated, well spoken. Typically not a minority (even though I am) and this is a bad stereotype being perpetuated"[37]**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1988, defining high class

In the event, only ten respondents mentioned race in their answers, and religion was referred to by only two. When the issue was raised, it was often with a certain sense of hesitation.

B. THE UNDERCLASS

While Singapore does possess underclass stereotypes, references to them appeared surprisingly rarely. Ah Bengs and Ah Lians – stereotypical representations of the underclass - were mentioned two times and one time respectively. Recourse to public welfare systems was seldom mentioned, and when brought up, tended to be seen either neutrally or as a cause for compassion, rather than as an example of scrounging.

> **lives in a rental home. neglected by society. visits the sso to get assistance only to be told they do not meet criteria. trying very hard to give their children a better life. children struggling in school maybe because they cannot find common grounds with their friends who can't understand their struggles."**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1990, defining low class

> **Takes public transport, stay in a rental hdb, low education level, jobless or low-paying job, limited savings - could be living hand to mouth. Could be on government assistance scheme"**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1972, defining low class

Similarly, references to low class criminality were rare. Only 10 respondents mentioned crime in their responses, something which in itself is likely to be a reflection of the nation's low crime rate.

> **Jobless or irregular income, yet to complete secondary or tertiary education, problems affording at least two meals a day, hefty medical bills, dysfunctional families, some history of crime or drug abuse, domestic violence victims"**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1987, defining low class

By contrast, it is not uncommon to see chavs, bogans and white trash (the British, Australian and U.S. equivalents of Ah Bengs and Ah Lians) used as shorthand to signify anyone below a certain income level in their respective countries.[37]

---

[37] This respondent listed his annual household income as $250,000, which is comfortably within the top quartile.
[38] Various polls have been conducted on the topic, notably the PRB survey on American Attitudes About Poverty and the Poor: https://www.prb.org/americanattitudesaboutpovertyandthepoor/ or the LA Times Princeton Research Bureau survey on How Americans View Poverty: https://www.latimes.com/projects/la-na-pol-poverty-poll/

C. FOREIGN WORKERS: THE INVISIBLE CLASS

Foreign workers – low-paid temporary immigrants mainly working in construction and domestic labour - are often described as Singapore's invisible underclass.[39] This trend was strongly confirmed by the survey responses.

Only two respondents cited foreign workers when asked to define low class. Domestic workers were only mentioned as expenditure items for the wealthy.

Given that Singapore was home to 972,600 foreign workers as of December 2018 (over 17% of the island's total population), their almost-complete absence from the collective psyche is remarkable, and does not bode well for the prospects of local pressure groups campaigning to accord these workers greater rights.[40]

Their apparent invisibility, despite recent attempts to raise the profile of issues surrounding their rights and treatment, indicates that they are simply not factored in when most people think about Singapore society.[41]

> **Migrant labourers. Works more than one job. Works more than 40 hours a week. Has no days off sometimes. Has no labour protection."**
>
> - Female respondent, born 1973, defining low class

972,600
foreign workers in Singapore

17+% of total population

At the opposite end of the scale, four respondents mentioned new citizens or foreign talent as being examples of high status.

D. INEQUALITY AS A POLITICAL PHENOMENON

While some of the answers may have raised questions about the reproduction of Singapore's elites, very few respondents saw the survey as a chance to express overtly political views. While the topic of class is strongly linked to inequality – a subject that has begun to hit the headlines with greater frequency in recent years – no respondents made the connection explicit in their answers.

While some respondents linked either high class or low class status to support for the government, or expressed resentment of those above or below them on the social scale, no one took an explicitly ideological view of the phenomena involved.

In the words of one respondent, material comfort often has the effect of reducing people's interest in politics:

> **Own a few properties and enjoys passive income from rentals of a few properties they own. He or she also takes more more tha 5 holidays per year. He or she does not worry about money and compares restaurants during social gatherings. He or she also does not care about politics but is keen to maintain status quo"**
>
> - Male respondent, born 1963, defining high class

---

[39] Brenda SA Yeoh and Shirlena Huang. "Spaces at the margins: migrant domestic workers and the development of civil society in Singapore." *Environment and planning A 31*, no. 7 (1999): 1149-1167.
[40] Statistics via the Ministry of Manpower website: https://www.mom.gov.sg/documents-and-publications/foreign-workforce-numbers Retrieved 7 April 2019.
[41] Koh Chiu Yee, Kellynn Wee, Charmian Goh, and Brenda SA Yeoh. "Cultural mediation through vernacularization: framing rights claims through the day off campaign for migrant domestic workers in Singapore." *International Migration 55*, no. 3 (2017): 89-104.

CONCLUSION: A WORK IN PROGRESS

Our goal in carrying out this survey was to create something through which Singaporeans would recognise and gain a more profound understanding of themselves and their neighbours. While the central aim was to produce a more accurate statistical snapshot of attitudes surrounding class, lifestyles, inequality and aspirations, the survey also hoped to draw a more nuanced and – hence – ambiguous portrait.

If anything, this survey should serve as a reminder that even statistics that demonstrate a strong majority opinion also capture a minority view, and that the latter should not be neglected. Behind every stark percentage point lies a plethora of contradictory opinions, each one containing a multitude of subtle distinctions and associations, and - beyond these - a vast treasury of lives lived and experiences recorded.

While we have tried to be as thorough as possible in this survey, social attitudes have a habit of evolving quickly. In a year's time opinions will have evolved. We are looking forward to repeating the survey in three or four years' time to find out what has changed and what has remained the same.
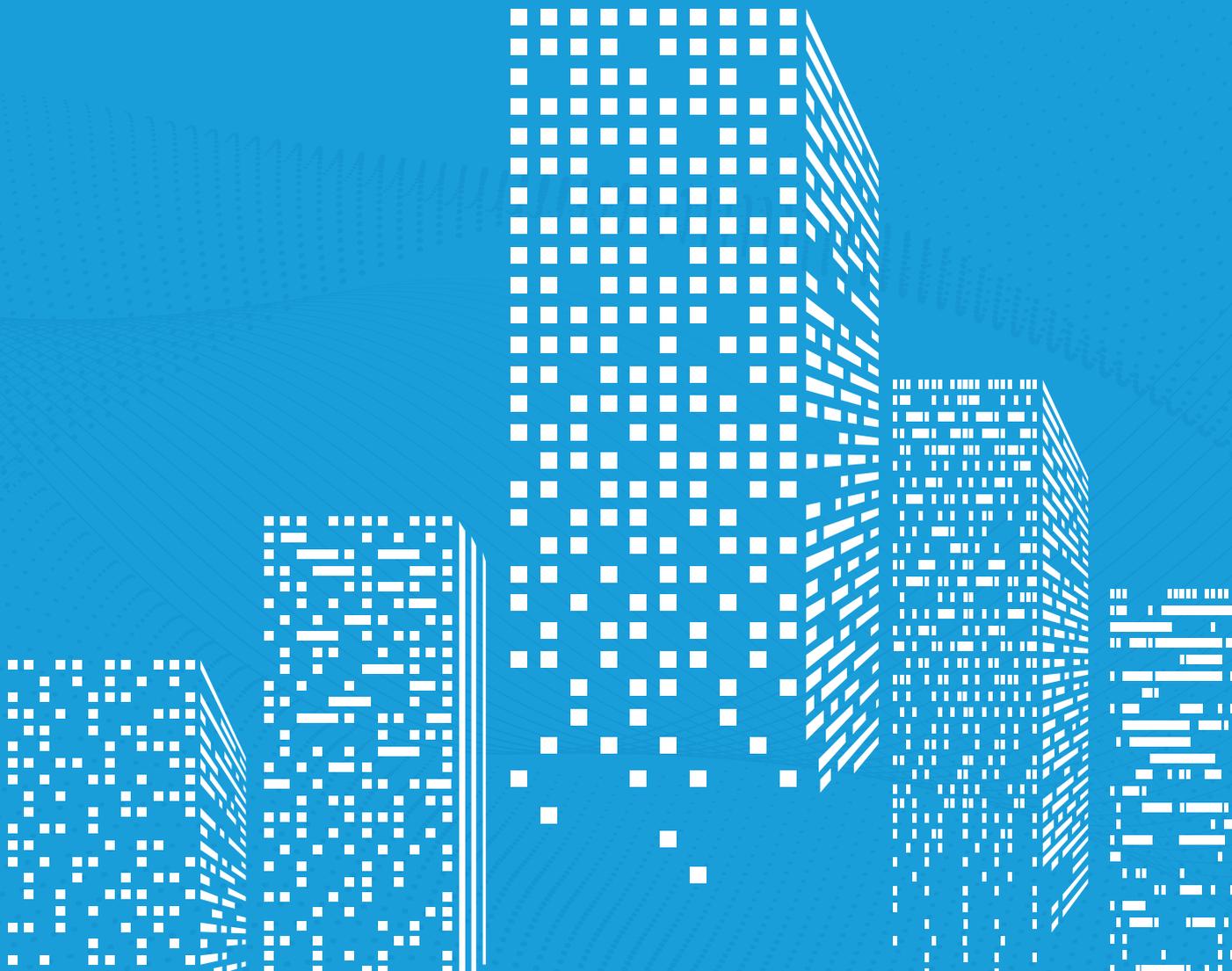
ANNEX I: QUESTIONNAIRE

PAGE 1: **NUS SURVEY: SINGAPOREANS' PERCEPTIONS OF CLASS**

We would like to ask you seven short questions about your background and your opinions concerning social and economic status markers. The survey should take around ten minutes to complete. The results will be collated and analysed as part of our research.

All answers are strictly anonymous, and we will not collect any personal data unless you wish to be informed about the survey results once they are published, in which case you will have the option to input your email address at the end of the survey. This is not an obligatory step, and you are free to leave the email box empty.

The data collected will be stored according to NUS data protection principles, and used only within the context of this project. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time. If you withdraw your consent, your answers will not be used in the final analysis.

If you are Singaporean or PR and would like to participate, please indicate your consent by clicking "yes" below.

1. Would you like to participate in this survey?

☐ YES   ☐ NO

PAGE 2: **DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

Thank you for agreeing to participate! First of all, we would like to find out a bit more about you. These demographic questions are necessary for us to organise our data.

2. What year were you born?

[Drop-down menu: 1919-2019]

3. What is your gender?

☐ Male   ☐ Female   ☐ Other/prefer not to say

4. Please give an estimate of your household's yearly income (if you are not sure, please make as close a guess as you can):

[Textbox, numbers only]

5. Imagine someone that you would consider to be of a high social class. Please write a few sentences to describe this person. For example: What is their daily life like? What is their background? What possessions do they own? (If you are not sure or disagree with the question, it is fine to say so.)

[Text box, mimimum input 75 characters]

6. Imagine someone that you would consider to be of a low social class. Please write a few sentences to describe this person. For example: What is their daily life like? What is their background? What possessions do they own? (If you are not sure or disagree with the question, it is fine to say so.)

[Text box, mimimum input 75 characters]

7. Finally, please indicate the social class that you feel closest to yourself:

☐ High   ☐ Medium   ☐ Low   ☐ I don't know   ☐ I prefer not to say

THANK YOU FOR TAKING OUR SURVEY!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bird, Robert and Frank Newcome. "What Determines How Americans Perceive Their Social Class?" Gallup. 27 February 2017. Retrieved 6 April 2019.

Bokhorst-Heng, Wendy D., and Imelda Santos Caleon. "The language attitudes of bilingual youth in multilingual Singapore." Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development 30, no. 3 (2009): 235-251.

Bourdieu, Pierre and Richard Nice (trans.). Outline of a Theory of Practice. Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Brown, Bruce L., and Wallace E. Lambert. "A cross-cultural study of social status markers in speech." Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement 8, no. 1 (1976): 39.

Bruns, Axel. "Faster than the speed of print: Reconciling 'big data'social media analysis and academic scholarship." First Monday 18, no. 10 (2013).

Chua, Vincent. "Social networks and labour market outcomes in a meritocracy." Social Networks 33, no. 1 (2011): 1-11.

Clark, Alan. Diaries: In Power 1983-1992. 1993, Weidenfield & Nicholson.

De Vaus, David. Analyzing social science data: 50 key problems in data analysis. Sage, 2002.

Fisher, Robert J. "Social desirability bias and the validity of indirect questioning." Journal of consumer research 20, no. 2 (1993): 303-315.

Gosline, R. "Rethinking Brand Contamination: How Consumers Maintain Distinction When Symbolic Boundaries Are Breached." New England Marketing Consortium 9 (2009).

Heckman, James J. "Selection bias and self-selection." In Econometrics, pp. 201-224. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1990.

Kelle, Udo. "Combining qualitative and quantitative methods in research practice: purposes and advantages." Qualitative research in psychology 3, no. 4 (2006): 293-311.

Kennedy, Caroline. Jacqueline Kennedy: Historic Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy. Hachette UK, 2011.

Koh, Chiu Yee, Kellynn Wee, Charmian Goh, and Brenda SA Yeoh. "Cultural mediation through vernacularization: framing rights claims through the day off campaign for migrant domestic workers in Singapore." International Migration 55, no. 3 (2017): 89-104.

Lim, Leonel. "Meritocracy, elitism, and egalitarianism: a preliminary and provisional assessment of Singapore's primary education review." Asia Pacific Journal of Education 33, no. 1 (2013): 1-14.

Marx, Karl. A contribution to the critique of political economy. No. 1. International Library Publishing Company; London, Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner, Limited, 1904.

Maxwell, Nan L., and Jane S. Lopus. "The Lake Wobegon effect in student self-reported data." The American Economic Review 84, no. 2 (1994): 201-205.

Miles, Matthew B. "Qualitative data as an attractive nuisance: The problem of analysis." Administrative science quarterly 24, no. 4 (1979): 590-601.

Mugglestone, Lynda. Talking proper: The rise of accent as social symbol. Oxford University Press on Demand, 2003.

Penn, Roger. "The Nuffield class categorization." Sociology15, no. 2 (1981): 265-271.

Savage, Mike, Fiona Devine, Niall Cunningham, Mark Taylor, Yaojun Li, Johs Hjellbrekke, Brigitte Le Roux, Sam Friedman, and Andrew Miles. "A new model of social class? Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey experiment." Sociology 47, no. 2 (2013): 219-250.

Sayer, Andrew. "What are you worth?: Why class is an embarrassing subject." Sociological research online 7, no. 3 (2002): 1-17.

Spence, Alexa, and Nick Pidgeon. "Framing and communicating climate change: The effects of distance and outcome frame manipulations." Global Environmental Change 20, no. 4 (2010): 656-667.

Quah, Stella R., Seen Kong Chiew, Yiu Chung Ko, and Sharon Mengchee Lee. "Social class in Singapore." Singapore: Centre for Advanced Studies (1991).

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. Skin in the game: Hidden asymmetries in daily life. Random House, 2018.

Tan Ern Ser. Does class matter: Social stratification and orientations in Singapore. World Scientific, 2004.

Watson, Burton. The analects of Confucius. Columbia University Press, 2007.

Wong, Theresa, and Brenda SA Yeoh. Fertility and the family: An overview of pro-natalist population policies in Singapore. Singapore: Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis, 2003.

Yeoh, Brenda SA, and Shirlena Huang. "Spaces at the margins: migrant domestic workers and the development of civil society in Singapore." Environment and planning A 31, no. 7 (1999): 1149-1167.